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Founders' Day Celebrated on Campus

February 17, 2010

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – It was a day to celebrate the new and honor traditions past at Illinois Wesleyan University during Founders' Day on Wednesday. This year marks the 160th anniversary of the 30 founders who gathered to sign Illinois Wesleyan's charter.

At the Founders' Day Convocation, President Richard F. Wilson said he believes the University is on course to fulfill the vision of the founders. "We must keep in mind their admonition which appears on the Founders' Gate: 'We stand in a position of incalculable responsibility.' That instruction requires us to be vigilant about our work as teachers and scholars," said Wilson.

In carrying on a responsibility to the founders, Wilson announced University alumnus and benefactor Byron Tucci has established a new endowed professorship for Illinois Wesleyan University. The 1966 graduate has created the [Byron S. Tucci Endowed Professorship](#) in honor of the faculty who assisted him. "Byron views this gift as a way to acknowledge the caring faculty members who make students the center of their attention and whose accomplishments over an extended period are key to the stature of the University," said Wilson.

Speaking in Westbrook Auditorium on Wednesday as part of the Convocation, Dorceta Taylor connected struggles for sustainability with the history of inequality in the United States.

"To have a sustainable society, one has to have a just society," said Taylor, an associate professor of environmental sociology and Afroamerican and African Studies at the University of Michigan, who helped to develop one of the nation's first environmental justice programs.

Throughout the nation's history, minority populations have been displaced in order to accommodate urban or majority expansion, said Taylor. She offered examples such as the Native American removal to reservations in the 1830s with the Trail of Tears, and the relocation of slaves to the west and south for cotton plantations and cattle ranching. "Minorities have been subjected to dislocation and disruption," said Taylor, the author of *The Environment and People in American Cities, 1600s-1900s: Disorder, Inequity, and Social Change* (Duke University Press, 2009). "These pervasive inequalities make it difficult to develop sustainable livelihood in communities."

In her talk titled "Environment, Social Justice and the Challenge of Sustainability," Taylor looked to the days around Illinois Wesleyan's founding in the 1800s, and found an unsung hero of ecology in the form of famed runaway slave and Underground Railroad leader Harriet Tubman.

"Very few people look at Harriet Tubman in terms of her ecology and her social justice efforts," said Taylor. "When I started reading biographies on her, I thought, 'Wow, this woman was an amazing ecologist.'" According to Taylor, Tubman used ecological expertise she learned from her parents, such as predicting weather conditions through cloud formations, navigating escape routes for slaves using the moss on trees, and coordinating communications through bird calls.

“She was known to commune with nature and listen to nature,” said Taylor. “It was Harriet Tubman’s use of ecology and commitment to social justice that led more than 300 people to freedom,” she said.

Tubman, who was a contemporary of Transcendentalist writers Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, is only just gaining recognition of her ecological prowess, said Taylor, who noted the paths of the Underground Railroad are becoming more than historic sites, but also designated as ecological treasures and part of the National Park Service.

Environmental inequalities through dislocation have grown as urban areas boomed, said Taylor. She spoke of the move of the “stink” factories, such as tanneries and slaughterhouses, from Manhattan in the 1670s right into a black neighborhood surrounding a freshwater pond called The Collect. In the 1850s, African-American and mixed-race neighborhoods were mowed down to make way for whites-only parks. “It wasn’t just black neighborhoods that were destroyed, but whites who lived among minorities that were also perceived as a threat,” said Taylor. She pointed out that in 1857, Central Park was built on German, Irish and African-American neighborhoods.

Evidence of the policy of dislocation can be seen today, said Taylor, by just looking at a city map. From the 1940s to the 1960s in cities such as New York, Detroit, Chicago and San Diego, “freeways punched through minorities communities,” said Taylor. “These may not have been pretty communities, but they vibrant communities filled with homes, theatres and churches.” The loss of these communities has led to urban decay and crumbling infrastructure, she added. “The challenge for sustainability is not just how many trees we are going to plant in a distant forest, but how are you going to deal with urban communities.”

Efforts are underway in cities such as Detroit to recapture ecological balance within an urban environment with ideas such as urban farms. The efforts are vital, said Taylor. “If we cannot figure out how to reclaim urban infrastructure and build more livable cities, we are not going to get very far in the discussion of sustainability.”

The Founders’ Day celebration continued on campus as faculty and staff gathered to celebrate the history of the University in the [new Joslin Atrium](#) with the traditional anniversary cake served in the new a 2,500 square-foot glass atrium addition to the Memorial Center. The Ames Library also held its annual exhibit highlighting the documents from the University’s founding, including Illinois Wesleyan’s “birth certificate.”

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